

UMW breaks ground on biomass system

The University of Montana-Western is about to become the newest addition to a growing list of schools being heated with what is known as "forest biomass fuel." A groundbreaking celebration for the new biomass system will be held at the UM-Western campus in Dillon this Thursday at 2 p.m. "Forest biomass," sometimes referred to as "slash" is the small diameter trees, shrubs, and debris left over from logging operations and forest fuel reduction projects. Essentially, it's the residue or waste from forest management operations that would otherwise be piled and burned. It can also include waste from wood manufacturing.

A variety of guests will speak

about this significant step forward for the "Fuels for Schools" program, designed to put biomass to good use, mainly as a heat source for numerous public schools, hospitals, and other public buildings throughout the state.

In the last several years the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) and the USDA Forest Service have teamed up with Resource Conservation and Development Councils (RC&Ds) in a program called "Fuels for Schools."

The UM-Western campus will be the latest and largest example of this new alternative energy source, and the first state-owned facility in the program.

A grant from the DNRC, administered by Headwaters RC&D, covered \$400,000 of the \$1.4 million system. The DEQ State Energy Conservation Bond Program provided just over \$1 million in the form of a 15-year low-interest loan, for the remaining costs of converting to biomass. The biomass project also enabled DEQ to conduct several energy-savings upgrades to campus facilities.

Together, these changes are expected to conserve enough natural gas annually to heat 240 average Montana homes.

"One goal of the Fuels for Schools program is to jump-start the development of a dispersed renewable energy market in the

state of Montana, to use what is typically a wasted by-product of forest management," explained Angela Farr, DNRC "Fuels for Schools" Coordinator. "By burning slash in modern, efficient boilers rather than in open piles, we reduce the air quality impact and use heat that would otherwise be wasted. We also shift fossil fuel users to a renewable resource and reduce net greenhouse gas emissions."

Using biomass is not a new concept in Europe or the eastern U.S., or with the wood products industry. Smurfit-Stone Container in Frenchtown is the biggest biomass energy user in Montana. Other examples of biomass

energy use are the University of Idaho and Chadron State College in Nebraska. All three use biomass as a dependable source of energy and have done so for over a decade.

"As a fuel source, biomass is cheaper than most alternatives for heating and cooling large buildings," explained DNRC Service Forestry Bureau Chief Rob Ethridge.

As an example, Ethridge said the UM-Western campus has a contract with Sun Mountain Lumber in Deer Lodge to provide wood chips at a cost of roughly \$3.25 per dekatherm, compared to the \$8.68 per dekatherm they pay for natural gas.

The new biomass boiler is expected to save the school about \$118,000 dollars per year in heating fuel, over what natural gas would have cost them at current prices, Farr said. After making their loan payment on the new system, they will be about \$20,000 ahead in the first year, she said.

"Montana Western is proud to be a partner in this joint project that will generate substantial energy savings for the state while making practical use of forest residue," said Susan Briggs, Western's Vice Chancellor for Administration and Finance.

The public is invited to attend the ceremony in Dillon, which will include displays and information about the new biomass system.